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## A Flight Before Light: Some Remarks on Levinas' Phenomenology of Eros

Virtue's no more in womankind  
But the green sickness of the mond  
Philosophy, their new delight . . .

J. Cleveland, *The Antiplatonic*

The feminine is not what opposes the masculine but what seduces it. The secret of its strength is that it is always somewhere else, never where it thinks it is, not in the history imputed to it but in seduction. Jean Baudrillard regards the "sovereignty of seduction as mastery of symbolic universe" and not as political or sexual power.<sup>1</sup> Seduction, though, has no power of its own or at least it seems not to have one; it only annuls the power of production. The theatricality, rhetoricity and sterility of seduction, however, seem to stand in opposition to the fertility (fecundity) of the feminine and its clandestinity. The feminine is what throws itself into the light (appearance) without becoming signification<sup>2</sup>, the not yet, unreality at the threshold of the real, clandestinity that "exhausts essence of this non-essence".<sup>3</sup>

Levinas, whose philosophy will be considered here as a phenomenological underpinning of the poetics of the feminine regards the female as an embodiment of the absolutely other. The feminine is not only one party in the fusion that binds the male and the female but an individual in the duality of beings. Thus conceived a relationship respects the alterity and preserves it despite the fact that the other remains constantly ungraspable, keeps slipping away, withdraws into its mystery. The transcendence as withdrawing and hiding as modesty are the inverse movements that characterize the phenomenology of Eros, that is a communication in eros. A "reversal of movement" lies at the bottom of a distinction between Greek and Christian love, the former always regarded as an aspiration of the lower towards

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1979), p. 250.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 257.

the higher whereas the latter the reverse, the stooping of the rich and the nobler to the poor and the common. In Levinas' philosophy love is considered as the veneration of the otherness with the alterity of the other person, however, different from submission and enslavement. Levinas does not conceal the fact that in his view the model of otherness is reminiscent of the medieval chivalric code with a great respect for the female dignity which bears here a cryptic name of the "voluptuous clandestinity".

The uniqueness of the relationship with alterity lies in the fact that it is a very particular kind of voluptuous pleasure, unlike any other fusion. The caress here is a mode which allows one to transcend contact as sensation since it is not confined to the touching hand, its warmth and softness; on the contrary, its essence is that it is not aware of what it seeks. Levinas explains that the tender that caress aims at designates a way, the one between being and not-yet-being, not signifying but frail in its vulnerability and morality. The caress always looks forward and opens up new perspectives onto the unknown and the ungraspable, its aim never grasping, possessing and knowing, the latter the synonyms and symptoms of power. J. Ruskin is not the first one to notice that men and women are assigned different modes of activity as is proclaimed in his essay *Of Queen's Gardens*; in an old-fashioned and slightly baroque manner he describes the major difference between the two powers:

The man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer. His intellect is for speculation and invention, his energy for adventure, for war and for conquest. . . . But the woman's power is not for rule, not for battle – and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement and decision. . . . Her great function is praise.<sup>4</sup>

The Ruskinian ideology of the feminine remains, though, at loggerheads with the phenomenology of Eros according to which each party remains complete and not completing each other in the union since the "pathos of love consists in an insurmountable duality of beings".<sup>5</sup> The status of man and woman is not, in Levinas' view, reducible to a difference in a genus but that of fraternity which has two aspects:

it involves individualities whose. . . singularity consists in each referring to itself. . . . On the other hand, it involves the commonness of a father, as though the commonness of race would not bring together enough.<sup>6</sup>

According to Levinas love is posited before the fusion and therefore escapes any possibility of the pre-existing whole. The other is not another existent but alterity, alienation which is its essence, the withdrawing mystery that is opposed to the movement of consciousness.

The communication with the other can be neither projected nor planned since it is a game absolutely unpredictable, with something inaccessible, always to come,

<sup>4</sup> Lynette Need, *Myths of Sexuality* (Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 34.

<sup>5</sup> Sean Hand, *The Levinas Reader* (Blackwell, 1989), p. 49.

<sup>6</sup> E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 214.

always other, the relationship with the future, with what is never there. Only such a relationship allows for the triumph and survival of the I, the situation described as the victory over death, the secret forced by the caress that does not grasp the possibles. In Levinas' words:

An amorphous non-I sweeps away the I into an absolute future when it escapes itself and loses its position as a subject. Its "intention" no longer goes forth unto the light, unto the meaningful.<sup>7</sup>

Here the meaningful remains always clandestine, does not lose its mystery in the disclosed, escapes profanation, goes beyond the expressible. The "death" of the subject Levinas refers to implies the birth of the self, in love and through love, which "it itself was ineluctably pre-conditioned to become",<sup>8</sup> as Stephen Dedalus aptly notices in his paraphrase of D. Scotus' theological passage on the divinity of love.

For Levinas love is not a need to be fulfilled but the desire which is free of lack, never gratified as its object constantly withdraws, is never grasped. The other is accepted *en toto* as a person, a Thou rather than an it so the other-oriented mode of thinking is not knowing but, rather, an insatiable desire feeding on itself. The relationship with the other is absolute in the sense that the other can always absolve himself from this relation with his integrity intact. The situation seems to reflect the ideal of the chivalric love and the respect for and the cult of the woman, the exceptional position of the feminine in the economy of being. This implies that the woman is not the mysterious unknowable but a mode of being that does not ease to slip away from the light. Hopkins expresses well the idea in question when he refers to the "nestling, world-mothering air" of the woman that nurses man everywhere<sup>9</sup>:

Worldmothering air, air wild,  
Wound with thee, in the isled,  
Fold home, fast fold thy child.

The same I-Thou relationship is articulated elsewhere in Hopkins as the moment of encounter that extends beyond the boundaries of self and enhances the very essence of self (cf. "self steeped and pashed").

The relation thus posited is inconceivable without the Thou which is not within the sphere of thought but remains as the indeterminate horizon of the encounter. Only in such a meeting one being confronts another in the intersubjective relationship in which the I truly affirms itself, its affirmation impossible without the presence of the Thou. This moment of the phenomenology of Love or the "pathos of love" as Levinas calls it is well described by Hopkins as "laced with the fire of stress", the metamorphosis caused by "the swoon of a heart" (Hopkins, *The of the Deutschland*) which results in a communion considered as the primary act of being. In Levinas' words:

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 254.

<sup>8</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Random House, 1934), p. 494.

<sup>9</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poems*, ed. W. H. Gardner and N. Mackenzie (Oxford University Press, 1970), No. 60.

Man can become whole not by virtue of the relation to himself but only by virtue of a relation to another self.<sup>10</sup>

This moment of the final self-affirmation is well described by Hopkins in *Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves*: "selfwrung, selfstrung, sheathe- and shelterless, thoughts against thoughts in groans grind". Only the self "steeped and pashed" can dialogue with the other since by opening oneself to the other one becomes responsible for him that is there "face to face". The self thus "dismembered, disremembered" does not seek the recognition of the other but a genuine communication (communion) with him which is not a limitation of one's self but a real participation in the dialogue with the ego deprived of its pride and imperialism characteristic of it. Levinas defines this moment as substitution, self-renunciation as the expulsion of self outside of itself. The substitution of the ego by the self is possible only through the other which in no way signifies a submission to the no-ego but the reverse, an openness to and an act of sacrifice for the other.

The responsibility for the other becomes obsession, a commitment to the other which precludes the return to oneself, not alienation but in-spiration in which the self is absolved of itself. We are reminded of the fact that we are all responsible for the others but, as Alyosha Karamazov holds it, "I am more responsible than anyone else." This moment of responsibility is labeled as the "responsibility for the responsibility of the other",<sup>11</sup> one more degree of responsibility to become oneself not as essence but as a sub-jectum that supports the whole of being. The relationship of such a status, the one between the subject and the other is communication that disregards indication, the semantic monstration as thematization and, as such, becomes the trace in which a face is ordered as irreducible to a sign. Instead of verbal communication Levinas' phenomenology of Eros proposes the epiphany of Face in which thematization as articulation is considered anarchic and destructive for the relation of the subject with the order.

In the phenomenology of Eros language is not the expression of one's view or opinion; it is the "face in which the other – the absolutely other – presents himself" and "does not do violence to it [the same] as do opinion or authority or the thaumaturgic supernatural".<sup>12</sup> Since the essence of language is being with the Other signification arises in being with language, within the primordial face to face with language. In Levinas' words:

Signification resembles it [a potency that evinces the act] as an overflowing of the intention that envisages by the being envisaged. But here the inexhaustible surplus of infinity overflows the actuality of consciousness. The shimmer of infinity, the face, can no longer be stated in terms of consciousness, in metaphors referring to light and the sensible. It is the ethical exigency of the face, which puts into question the consciousness that welcomes it.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> E. R. Smith (ed.), *Emmanuel Levinas. Between Man and Man* (London: Collins, 1961), p. 68.

<sup>11</sup> S. Hand, *The Levinas Reader*, p. 107.

<sup>12</sup> E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 203.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 207.

This is the best description of poetic language, the one which signifies while relinquishing signification, undoes the structure of language, goes beyond the codes and systems. The surplus, the excess Levinas refers to, is that which opens man to the Other before saying anything, the “hyperbolic passivity of giving prior to all willing and thematization”.<sup>14</sup>

The excess of language the poet experiences as saying (prior to speaking) is related to the “vigilance of insomnia”, the always active presence of the other who breaks the rest of the same, interferes when equality tends to threaten with wakefulness falling to sleep. Insomnia as wakefulness exceeds the limits of intentionality as irreducible to the affirmation of the same and inclines towards the Other in the indeterminated, disinterested, immaterial way. This cry of “ethical revolt” is a recognition of the infinite obligation to the Other which overcomes intentionality and reveals the good that reigns beyond being. Levinas’ “eternal vigilance”, a waking dream, the wakefulness and insomnia, structure his ethics of the infinity and alterity, characterize existence not as the temporalizing movement but the one which is “an absolutely unavoidable presence”,<sup>15</sup> the “incessance of presence” (infinity).

Phenomenology of Eros is supported by the philosophy of insomnia, eternal wakefulness which occurs in a nocturnal space as opposed to the diurnal light of thematization. It is in such a space that our security is threatened since silence, tranquillity and void of sensations to which one is exposed construct an absolutely indeterminate menace. The “horror of darkness” is not, however, an anxiety about or a danger of death but the fear of being different from Heideggerian fear of nothingness. Levinas’ argument harkens back to the third Cartesian meditation which indicates that before the notion of oneself man possesses the sense of the infinity in him, the orientation towards the Other that overturns consciousness, the presence to self which is the end of the monadology of the “I think”.

Phenomenology of Eros is the philosophy of alertness, patience and waiting for that which is to come and which still remains ungraspable, clandestine, the hidden that will never become a signification. The equivocation of such a situation, its metaphoricality is well described in Levinas’ essay:

The secret appears without appearing, not because it would appear half-way, or with reservation, or in confusion. The simultaneity of the clandestine and the exposed precisely defines *profanation*. It appears in equivocation. But it is profanation that permits equivocation – essentially erotic – not the reverse. . . . The simultaneity of the equivocation of this fragility and this weight of non-signifyingness, heavier than the weight of the formless real, we shall term *femininity*.<sup>16</sup>

The feminine is the vertiginous depth of what is not yet, of what remains between being and not-yet-being, the frailty of the Beloved, the equivocal which “plays

<sup>14</sup> S. Hand, *The Levinas Reader*, p. 183.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>16</sup> E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 257.

between speech and the renouncement of speech",<sup>17</sup> the non-signifyingness of the face prior to "any finite thought and every thought of the finite".<sup>18</sup> The expression of the face, the revelation, is such that it provokes resistance, recalcitrance not in a negative sense of forcing violence or struggle but in the positive sense of generating a response to his welcome. This is the ethical attitude which arises from the presence of the infinite in the human and goes beyond intentionality. The concern of the Infinite with man via his [man's] relationship with another man in the mystery of encounter is the kernel of the phenomenology of Eros. In Levinas words:

The Infinite is not indifferent to me. It is in calling me to other men that transcendence concerns me. In this unique intrigue of transcendence, the non-absence of the Infinite is neither presence, nor representation. Instead, the idea of the Infinite is to be found in my responsibility for the Other.<sup>19</sup>

According to Levinas love can be enacted only through the Infinite since then it is free of any teleological bias, different from the absorption in immanence and constitutive of alterity. For Levinas love is a mode of infinitizing rather than totalizing since the latter is synonymous with power, possessing and knowing. In love the proximity of the Other implies an absolute remoteness and pathos of distance and duality. The absence of the Other, never grasped and possessed aspires to the mystery of love which is the face-to-face without intermediacy, the love as awakening, a responsibility for another and a subjection to the Other. It is not the love without eros but one in which Eros is of phenomenological validity.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 260.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 197.

<sup>19</sup> Alan Montefiore (ed.), *Philosophy in France Today* (Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 112.

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### **Lot przed światłem: kilka uwag na temat fenomenologii erosu u Emanuela Levinasa**

#### **Streszczenie**

Artykuł jest fenomenologicznym ujęciem problematyki relacji z Innym, który nie jest przedmiotem pożądania (zaspokojenia potrzeby), lecz celem pragnienia metafizycznego „wolnego od braku”, pragnienia, które zostaje zaspokojone w nieskończoności. Inny pobudza moje zatroskanie i odpowiedzialność, nie jest częścią mnie, lecz indywidualnością całościową i jednostkową. Między mną a Innym istnieje różnica i nieskończona odległość, której nie sposób przekroczyć, ująć w pojęcia czy uchwycić intuicją. Można jej tylko pragnąć. Pragnienie Innego jest pragnieniem nieskończoności, które ujawnia się w momencie spotkania z Innym, a zatem jest to doświadczenie w sferze etycznej (Levinas), która wyprzedza doświadczenie ontologiczne (Heidegger); pragnienie nieskończoności jawi się bowiem jako bardziej źródłowe niż jakiekolwiek myślenie rozumujące. Relacja z Innym to akt bezinteresownej radości, rozkoszowania się, odczucie ciepła i prawdziwego zdomowienia się, gdzie rodzi się ruch ku światłu, które przyciąga człowieka, daje mu szczęścia i prawdziwe odczucie *principium individuationis*. Pragnienie drugiego zwraca się przede wszystkim ku twarzy kobiety, która o coś prosi i coś nakazuje, wzywając do kontaktu, zatroskania i odpowiedzialności.

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**Le Vol avant la lumière: certaines remarques sur la phénoménologie de l'éros chez Emmanuel Lévinas****Résumé**

L'article est une tentative de montrer du point de vue phénoménologique la relation avec l'Autre lequel n'est pas l'objet d'un désir (assouvissement d'un besoin), mais l'objectif d'un désir métaphysique „libre du manque”, d'un désir qui sera assouvi dans l'infini. L'Autre éveille mon souci et mon sens de responsabilité, il n'est pas une partie du „moi”, mais une individualité totale et unique. Entre le „moi” et l'Autre il existe une différence et une distance infinie qu'il est impossible de dépasser, conceptualiser ou saisir intuitivement. On ne peut que la désirer. Le désir de l'Autre est le désir de l'infini qui se révèle au moment de la rencontre avec l'Autre. Par conséquent, c'est une expérience dans le domaine éthique (Lévinas) qui précède l'expérience ontologique (Heidegger), car le désir de l'infini apparaît comme plus originel que n'importe quelle pensée „raisonnante”. La relation avec l'Autre est un acte de la joie gratuite, de la (ré)jouissance, le sentiment de la chaleur et de la véritable familiarisation éveillant l'aspiration à la lumière, celle-ci attirant l'homme, lui procurant le bonheur et le véritable sentiment du *principium individuationis*. Le désir de l'Autre s'adresse avant tout au visage de la femme qui prie et ordonne en incitant au contact, au souci et à la responsabilité.